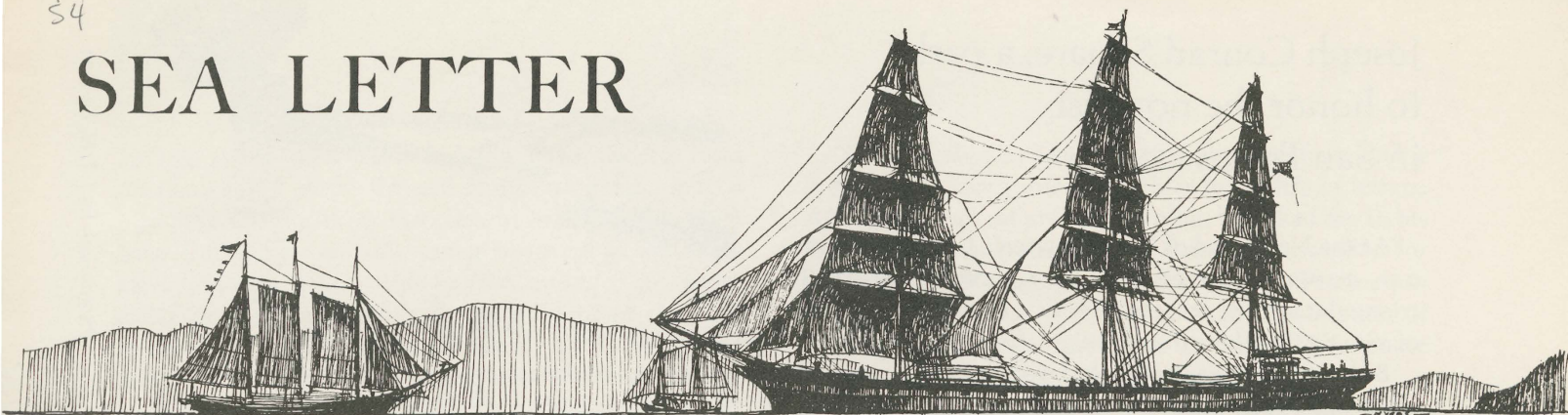


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SEA LETTER



OF THE SAN FRANCISCO MARITIME MUSEUM / June, 1974

Joseph Conrad's Command, OTAGO

"Even as a blackened hulk, her loveliness of line was a delight."

*End of the tether . . . OTAGO in her last resting place on the shores
of the Derwent River, Tasmania. Photograph by Karl Kortum, seaman
on the bark KAIULANI, in the port of Hobart at the time.*



Joseph Conrad Square, a park to honor the novelist in San Francisco

At the North end of San Francisco's Columbus Avenue, across the street from the Cannery, is a small, triangular slice of real estate with a large, rusting piece of iron resting there like some great, abstract sculpture.

But that broken hulk, that red scrap, is part of what will become an international memorial honoring famed writer Joseph Conrad.

Once that iron piece was the stern section and rudder of the *Otago*, the small iron bark where Conrad first experienced the responsibility of deep water shipmaster.

In the *Shadow Line*, published in 1916, Conrad describes taking command of the *Otago* at Bangkok in 1888 and compares the sailing ship to a beautiful woman:

"Yes, there she was. Her hull, her rigging filled my eye with a great content. That feeling of life-emptiness which had made me so restless for the last few months lost its bitter plausibility, its evil influence, dissolved in a flow of joyous emotion.

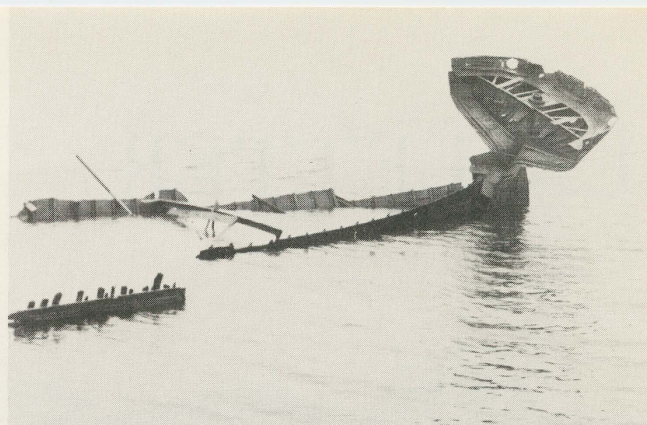
"At first glance I saw that she was a high-class vessel, a harmonious creature in the lines of her fine body, in the proportioned tallness of her spars. Whatever her age and her history, she had preserved the stamp of her origin. She was one of those craft that in virtue of their design and complete finish will never look old. Amongst her companions moored to the bank, and all bigger than herself, she looked like a creature of high breed—an Arab steed in a string of cart-horses. . . . I knew that, like some rare women, she was one of those creatures whose mere existence is enough to awaken an unselfish delight. One feels that it is good to be in the world in which she has her being."

The vessel that Conrad celebrated with these words was built in Glasgow in 1869 and put in at San Francisco on her maiden voyage around the world. *Otago* entered the Golden Gate on July 14, 1870, 65 days from Newcastle, N.S.W., with a cargo of coal.

According to the August 1, 1870 *Guide's* List of "Vessels up and loading for foreign and Atlantic parts," the British bark *Otago*, Captain Cameron was loading at Pier 1, Beale Street, agent, Balfour Guthrie and Co. of 430 California Street. Began loading July 29. Due to sail Wednesday, August 3rd to Liverpool.

This San Francisco visit was eighteen years before Conrad encountered her in Bangkok. Out of this fateful encounter came one of the great short stories of the English language, *The Secret Sharer*,* as well as *Falk* and *The Shadow Line*.

But today the *Otago* is largely unrecognized. Hopefully not for long. The San Francisco Maritime Museum



Photograph by J. J. N. Barnett

By 1965, the breaking up process left only the bottom, the stern, and the rudder. The latter two portions were removed and brought to San Francisco through the generosity of Leonard Martin and the Matson Navigation Company.

with the help of the Polish Arts and Culture Foundation of San Francisco, have plans for a fitting memorial to honor the famed writer.

The memorial in the tiny triangle at Beach, Columbus and Leavenworth Streets will consist of the stern of the *Otago*, a cast of Sir Jacob Epstein's priceless bust of Conrad, and a bronze plaque inscribed with the above lines from *The Shadow Line*.

The triangle, which will become a "square"—Joseph Conrad Square—will be, in effect, a gift to the people of San Francisco by the San Francisco Maritime Museum Association. The contemplated improvements, like the Maritime Museum itself, two blocks away, will be carried out as a public service.

The little triangle is owned by the Southern Pacific Company and is leased on a long-term basis by the San Francisco Maritime Museum.

Galsworthy's Account of his First Meeting with Joseph Conrad

"... It was in March 1893 that I first met Conrad on board the English sailing-ship *Torrens* in Adelaide Harbour. He was superintending the stowage of cargo. Very dark he looked in the burning sunlight—tanned, with a peaked brown beard, almost black hair, and dark brown eyes, over which the lids were deeply folded. He was thin, not tall, his arms very long, his shoulders broad, his head set rather forward. He spoke to me with a strong foreign accent. He seemed to me strange on an English ship. For fifty-six days I sailed in his company.

"The chief mate bears the main burden of a sailing ship. All the first night he was fighting a fire in the hold. None of us seventeen passengers knew of it till long after. It was he who had most truck with the tail of that hurricane off the Leeuwin, and later with another storm. He was a good seaman, watchful of the weather, quick in handling the ship; considerate with the apprentices—we had a long unhappy Belgian youth

among them, who took unhandily to the sea and dreaded going aloft; Conrad compassionately spared him all he could. With the crew he was popular; they were individuals to him, not a mere gang; and long after he would talk of this or that among them, especially of old Andy the sailmaker: "I liked that old fellow, you know." He was friendly with the second mate, a cheerful, capable young seaman, very English; and respectful, if faintly ironic, to his whiskered, stout old English captain. I, supposed to be studying navigation for the Admiralty Bar, would every day work out the position of the ship with the captain. On one side of the saloon table we would sit and check our observations with those of Conrad, who from the other side of the table would look at us a little quizzically. For Conrad had commanded ships, and his subordinate position on the *Torrens* was only due to the fact that he was still then convalescent from the Congo experience which had nearly killed him. Many evening watches in fine weather we spent on the poop. Ever the great teller of a tale, he had already nearly twenty years of tales to tell. Tales of ships and storms, of Polish revolution, of his youthful Carlist gun-running adventure, of the Malay seas, and the Congo; and of men and men; all to a listener who had the insatiability of a twenty-five-year-old.

Scrapping of OTAGO had reached a point in 1942 where the bow was gone. Paul Soules of the KAIULANI crew visits the remains.

"On that ship he talked of life, not literature; and it is NOT true that I introduced him to the life of letters. At Cape Town, on my last evening, he asked me to his cabin, and I remember feeling that he outweighed for me all the other experiences of that voyage. Fascination was Conrad's great characteristic—the fascination of vivid expressiveness and zest, of his deeply affectionate heart, and his far-ranging subtle mind. . .

"I used to stay with him a good deal from 1895-1905, first at Stanford in Essex and then at Stanford in Kent. He was indefatigably good to me while my own puppy eyes were opening to literature, and I was still in the early stages of that struggle with his craft which a writer worth his salt never quite abandons.

"His affectionate interest was always wholly generous. In his letters to me—two to three hundred—there is not a sentence which breaks, or even jars, the feeling that he cared that one should do good work. There is some valuable criticism, but never any impatience, and no stinting of appreciation or encouragement. He never went back on friendship. The word "loyalty" has been much used by those who write or speak of him. It has been well used. He was always loyal to what he had at heart—to his philosophy, to his work, and to his friends; he was loyal even to his dislikes (not few) and to his scorn."

From My Father, Joseph Conrad by Borys Conrad. Coward, McCann and Geohegan, Inc.

Photograph by Karl Kortum

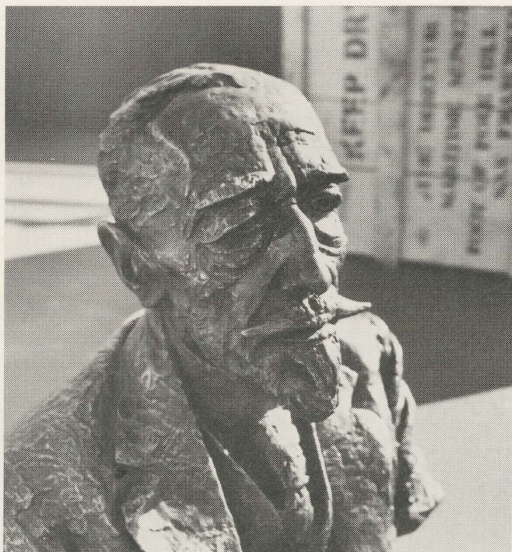


Alan Villiers Description of *Otago* as a Hulk

"One of the coal hulks at the Hobart wharves was the barque *Otago*. I knew this was the square-rigger which Joseph Conrad had once commanded. Even as a blackened hulk, her loveliness of line was a delight. Her bowsprit had been shorn away, and she was cut down to her lower-masts. Some of the yards which once spread her lovely sails now stood up-ended in her holds, to carry cargo gear. An ugly galvanized iron house stood on the foredeck to cover a donkey-boiler which provided steam for her friction winches. No one lived aboard, and her decks were covered with coal-dust and neglected. She still carried her original wheel and all the fittings on the poop. Apart from the grime, the absence of rigging, and the removal of the binnacle,

her poop was still much as Conrad must have known it. Sometimes she felt the urge of the sea, at her plebeian berth, and tugged at her moorings. I loved to go aboard and walk the tiny poop in the very early mornings while the sunrise brought serene beauty to all of Derwent-side. What a lovely command she must have been! No wonder Conrad was proud of her, and took her through Torres Straits. She was small, even smaller than the *James Craig*. But she was a little beauty, and must have been as responsive as a well-bred horse. There was still a fine air of the deep sea about old Hobart in the 1920's, though all the bluegum clippers were long gone and the slipway where many of them were built was overgrown with grass. It was a good place for the *Otago* to rest her bones. I don't know whether Conrad himself ever visited Hobart. If he did, I think he must have approved of the place, though the only employment it could find for his sweet iron barque was to hawk dirty coal to steamers."

From the *Set of the Sails*
Charles Scribner's Sons



Sir Jacob Epstein's Conrad

This portrait in bronze by the British sculptor, Sir Jacob Epstein, will accompany the OTAGO transom in the proposed Conrad memorial. Mr. William Loorz of Stolte Corporation became interested in this project, and it was Stolte's gift that made possible this acquisition.

Of Epstein's Conrad the critic Hilton Kramer has written in *Arts* magazine: "This is a head very like a mountain, yet Epstein conveys brilliantly the profound human equations which reside in this complicated structure of ridges and valleys and sudden dark cavities. No wonder Conrad himself wrote of it, 'It is wonderful to go down to posterity like that.'"

H. L. Mencken said of Conrad,

"He transcended all the rules. There have been, perhaps, greater novelists, but I believe that he was incomparably the greatest artist who ever wrote a novel."

Ernest Hemingway added,

"If I knew that by grinding Mr. T. S. Eliot into a fine powder and sprinkling that powder over Mr. Conrad's grave, Mr. Conrad would appear shortly, looking very annoyed at the forced return, and commence writing, I would leave for London early tomorrow with a sausage grinder."

Bertrand Russell, on First Meeting Conrad in 1913:

"We seemed to sink through layer after layer of what was artificial, till gradually both reached the central fire. It was an experience unlike any other that I have known. . . . I came away bewildered, and hardly able to find my way among ordinary affairs."